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AUTHOR Comprone, Joseph J.
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ABSTRACT

To link the perspectives of Walter Ong on the history of literacy to the psychological context of college writers, this paper contrasts the mind-sets that are important to writers: the oral community of the ancient epic and the modern psychological perspective, with its emphasis on the one against the many. In the first section of the paper, Ong's work is related to the history of literacy, while the second section explains the theories and significance of ancient and modern oral formulary. The third section analyzes and then contrasts Tudor and early Renaissance rhetoric to the Romantic Movement's de-emphasis of rhetoric, and the fourth section connects historical development of rhetoric to student writers of today. The final section delineates four teaching strategies intended to address the needs of modern writing students. (CRH)

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Joseph J. Comprone

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"AN ONGIAN PERSPECTIVE ON THE HISTORY OF LITERACY: PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTEXT AND TODAY'S COLLEGE STUDENT WRITER"

In many ways, Walter Ong suggests, the twentieth-century is more humanistic than many of those earlier ages often thought by scholars to be the epitome of humanistic culture. This is so simply because the twentieth-century has "anthropologized" all knowledge, has demanded that all knowledge, and there is more of it around us today than ever before, be seen from the perspective of one, essentially very human, question: what good is it to me?

The me in this question needs defining. Individuals in an oral society thought of themselves as defined by social roles. Humans, to the ancient non-humanists, were beings who could not live out of or away from communal contexts. Odysseus, in all his journeys, keeps within him the heightened social conscience of a man who is essentially Greek, not essentially Odysseus. Even Aeneas, a national hero in a decidedly written epic, never seems to many modern readers a "real man"; we see him as Dido saw him, a somewhat fanatic and obsessive-compulsive Roman patriot with clear political goals and a great deal of knowledge of his people's past. But that is not the Aeneas of the Aeneid. The Aeneas of the Aeneid is not at all psychologically obsessed; he is, rather, socially obsessed. He cannot ever forget that a real man is not an individual alone among the crowds, a Marlboro man beset with a vanishing wilderness, but an individual totally committed to a social-communal context.

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What place does this foray into epic context have in a paper at a writing conference? I believe that these two very different mind-sets--the ancient epic, with its context of oral community; the modern psychological perspective, with its emphasis on the one against the many--lies at the center of much of our problems, as teachers, with students and writing. In this paper, I wish to take a circular route, first explaining how Walter Ong's interpretation of the history of literacy helps explain this split between individual orientation and social perspective as it influences modern writers. Then, making full circle back to my concern with epic wholeness, I will apply these historical patterns to current literacy problems as they impinge on the college writing classroom.

I. Ong and the History of Literacy

One of the reasons Walter Ong's work has not been applied more often to composition theory in recent years is that his work is always tied to a broad historical-cultural perspective and to general anthropological work in recent non-occidental history. His work also presents problems for the specialist because it bases its research in previously ignored or ill-attended areas: on school rhetoric and scholastic grammar school tools and programs such as textbooks and curricula. This ignorance of the significance of Ong's work among composition teachers and researchers continues despite several obvious openings for connections between Ong's ideas on oral and written literacy and Frank DeAngelo's and others' work on conceptual theory and writing, with the current interest of composition theorists in

speech-act theory and composition, and--most obviously--with the recent attention by composition theorists to research in modern rhetorical history.

In this section, I shall attempt to relate Ong's work to composition with a general review of his theories on two movements in the history of literacy:

1. Oral Formulary, Ancient and Modern
2. Tudor Rhetoric and Romantic Expressivism

II. Oral Formulary, Ancient and Modern

Ong's ideas on the ancient, oral formulaic tradition are built upon the work of Havelock, Parry, Lord, MaGoun, Bessinger, Scholes and Kellogg, and others who have established the theory that the presence of repeated phrases, words, rhythm, and commonplace content in oral epics signifies not simply a different style or technology in the discourser but a qualitatively different consciousness of the world and self. As my introduction has suggested, the oral performer and his audience were intricately bound together, identified with one another, by the conventional forms of their stories. The ritualistic sharing of culture represented by the texts of Gilgamesh, Beowulf, the Illiad, and the Odyssey served as cultural paidaia or encyclopedia, bringing poet and audience together in an explicitly defined and dramatic re-enactment of manners and customs. In the process of re-enactment, cultural beliefs and values were re-established in a way that both entertained and instructed all who were present at the oral performance.

This overgeneralized account of the function and effects of oral formulaic in ancient epics, of course, leaves out the negative side of the oral formulaic coin. Being "conscious of" what you were hearing (and doing) as you listened to an epic was simply not important. Stepping outside of your social role as participant in the epic drama would have been more than simply discourteous or indecorous; it would have been beyond your cognitive-emotional capabilities and perceptions. To question Aeneas' rejection of Dido, or to question his decision to leave the weaker Trojans behind in Western Sicily as he moves toward Rome and the Etruscans would simply not have entered the minds of the "oral reader" of Vergil's written epic because such a reader would have been bound by his pact with the oral poet not to move outside the traditional content, purpose, and intention of the story. Since The Aeneid was a national epic with the purpose of explaining the origins of the Roman empire, the oral reader would have "looked back" on his past in just the way the story had demanded. The question for such an "oral reader" would not have been, as it is even for my sophomore-level students in a beginning Humanities course: Why does Aeneas always put country before self, or why are Aeneas' actions and words so predictable? They are predictable because the Aeneid's "oral readers" were reading according to the rules of oral epic, where the drama was in the re-enactment of already-known histories, not in the psychological life of the main character.

In this sense, then, even the most culturally unaware of my sophomore Humanities students is more "culturally aware" than his

or her counterpart in an oral formulaic culture. But, of course, saying that is to miss the point. What I really mean when I say such a thing is that even the most amateurish member of a highly literature culture has a stronger sense of private consciousness than the most sophisticated member of a primarily oral community.

Perhaps the best way to point out this essential difference in cultural perspective is to contrast what Ong has called primary and secondary orality. I have been describing a primarily oral culture up to this point: a culture in which writing is either non-existent or limited to signatures, lists, and markings denoting ownership, in which the group defines itself not by the content and form of its written texts (whether they be computer print-outs or literary masterpieces) but by the mnemonic formulas and cultural repetitions of content that exist in the oral epic. A primary oral culture demands total participation: the participants' nervous system and senses are taken up entirely by the need to act out and re-feel the meaning of the oral text. Text itself, then, becomes a term signifying "conventional forms for retaining and passing on meaning," not the elaborate set of physical artifacts that a modern man thinks of as stored in the Library of Congress.

Modern Western man, according to Ong, is entering a stage of "secondary orality," which "is founded on--though it departs from--the individualized introversion of the age of writing, print, and rationalism which intervened between it and primary orality . . ." (Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology, New York: Cornell University Press, 1971, p. 285). Western man, now

thoroughly literate in at least the broader sense of that term, is returning, because of a shift to electronic media, to some forms of oral literacy. Advertising slogans are endlessy reproduced on television and radio commercials. Cassettes, tapes, video equipment all immerse the modern person in interactive visual-verbal contexts. Books are often produced by word-processing and editing at a distance, are--as Ong explains in another article--"talked"rather than written. ("Media Transformation: The Talked Book," Interfaces of the Word, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977, pp. 82-91) All three electronic devices seem, at times, to have altered our entire frame on expression and communication.

But we are looking superficially if we see only these obvious aspects of secondary orality. On a deeper level, there are substantial differences between ancient and contemporary orality.

First, the formulary aspects of current orality are not grounded in everyday life. They are not paidaic. We continue to rely on written encyclopedias, dictionaries, almanacs, and reference books of all kinds. Our formulas serve no serious or long-term mnemonic functions, at least not on a broad cultural level.

Our formulas are also secondary to the way we organize our lives. They may help car manufacturers sell cars; they may help a political candidate arouse a particular audience, but we know that, if they are perceived as important, they will eventually be written down and analyzed. Think, just for a moment, of all the scholarly articles in recent years on graffitti, evidence that

event he private, bathroom expressions of the secondarily oral individual are subject to scholarly scrutiny. Our slogans and clichés are not used to aid our memories, nor are they intended as indirect and entertaining forms of education. They are what we call "popular culture," to be discussed and analyzed only within the frames of reference that have been defined by literate contexts.

Second, when oral formulas are taken up by serious culture, as objects of analysis rather than functional structures of language, they often become the stuff of irony. Ong refers to pop and op art (Rauschenberg, Warhol, Lichtenstein) as examples of the secondary oral culture's relegation of the new oral formulas to a secondary communicative function, where the slogan or catch-phrase becomes the basis for ironic put-down in an early Simon and Garfunkel or Bob Dylan lyric, or where a political slogan catches on as the educated public's way of putting down the politician who first expressed it.

In fact, this ironic attitude toward oral formulary is shared by writing teachers, where it is most evident in hallway discussions of student writing. English teachers are forever sharing excerpts from student papers, reading them aloud, emphasizing the homespun or pseudo academic cliché, literally using the "halls" of academe as an unspoken but pervasive context for a rehearsed verbal irony. Students' attempts to connect their writings with a communal tradition, with words as they have been used by others, become, to the teacher who is immersed in a

post-romantic, written culture's belief in the essential originality of written texts, the object of ridicule and laughter.

I am not here simplistically defending the shopworn, nor an I arguing that the idea of the writer as the weaver of original cloth is a necessarily bad one for teachers of writing to hold. I am simply arguing that, as writing teachers, we must constantly remind ourselves that many of our students have not experienced a primary oral tradition, nor have they been given a full understanding of what originality means in the context of a secondarily oral, primarily written culture.

This cultural relegation of the new forms of orality to a secondary linguistic and cultural function is perhaps most clearly exemplified for writing teachers by their own and literary critics' responses to clichés in literary and students texts. Students who produce clichés in English 101 papers may mistakenly be thinking that they will please their teachers because the cliché they are repeating is drawn from the subculture to which the teacher seems, to the student, to belong. Take, for example, this formulary opening to a paper contrasting traditional and modern heroes.

> Modern heroes are caught between a rock and a hard place. They don't relate to their societies the way older heroes did, but they can't really strike out on their own, either. They want to be relevant to the people around them but true to themselves as well.

This student certainly had something to say in a course that was organized around themes that asked students to contrast Beowulf,

Achilles, Hector, and Aeneas to Stephen Daedalus and Emma Bovary. But her ideas are, excuse the cliché, cloaked in the kind of clichéd prose that post-Romantic "serious" writers are supposed to avoid. Writers, in a primarily written culture must produce original thought and language, even, at least to a degree, in school, as beginners. And new criticism, for all of its emphasis on Eliot's separation and assimilation of tradition and individual talent, has not reversed the tendency of romantic expressivism in this area: even our composition students must discover their own voices amidst the complexities of a wide-array of reading experiences. Written language simply has not encouraged explicitly formulaic expression since the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. I. A. Richards, Ong points out, helped establish in his Practical Criticism the same kind of negative reaction to the cliché in the New Criticism (Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology, p. 297).

This analysis of the modern student writer's dilemma, caught between the need to connect language with its oral sources in order to provide it with a sense of community and the need to be original, leads us back to irony as a particularly modern mode of discourse. To be ironic often means using familiar and conventional language in an unfamiliar and unconventional context. The friction between surface language and the writer's more sophisticated sense of community with other writers and readers becomes the basis for originality. But only the experienced writer and reader can balance these oral-based surface features of language within this ironic context. Student writers, at best,

can only imitate what they have yet to understand; at the worst, they simply string together, sometimes in garbled syntax, the slogans and clichés of secondary orality.

III. Tudor Rhetoric and Romantic Expressivism

In many of his essays, Ong contrasts Tudor and early Renaissance rhetoric to the romantic movement's de-emphasis of rhetoric (see particularly the second, third, and eleventh chapters of Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology). To Ong, rhetoric enjoyed its greatest influence (in the first and second century Rome and in Tudor English) when it existed as a discipline and methodology for organizing the written medium around the formulas of an oral culture. It was a discipline half-way between the craft of the oral epic in ancient times and the inspiration behind the written word in the romantic period. The oral perspectives of the rhetorical tradition were later separated from the expressive function by romantic writers.

Ong makes this contrast most explicitly in his analysis of the handbooks, commonplace books, and copia of the fifteenth and sixteenth century English and European school traditions. These different kinds of encyclopedia of oral formulary, together with Erasmus' work with the tropes as "turns of thought" or copia, combined to produce what Ong has termed an "oral residue" in fifteenth and sixteenth century Western rhetoric. These collections of conventional maxims and formulas served Renaissance writers in several old-fashioned ways: they helped them remember ideas and forms of language as they composed, much in the way the oral composer would remember the plot of an epic by stringing

together traditional sayings in conventional rhythms and forms; they helped them remember content because each conventional form almost always related back to a topic or place where additional information might be found (Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology, p. 61). This interaction of tropes and topics, reinforced and woven together by the Renaissance writer's ongoing sensitivity to formulaic language, made for what Ong suggests was a far more stable environment for the Tudor writer. Erasmus alone wrote eight books of Apothegms (loose collections of the sayings of particular individuals), produced some four thousand Adages (exemplary proverbs and popular sayings, generally unattributed), and generated his volumnious verbal copia. All these examples of "oral residue" were aimed at teachers and students of composition; they were "informal jottings, hurling at the teacher or pupil in cloying abundance thousands of ways of varying Latin words or phrases and of varying thought" (Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology, p. 30). This supercargo of transcribed oral remnants helped the Renaissance schoolboy connect his composing process with the spoken tradition, and with other writers who were experiencing the same training, all in Latin. However repressive and severe this training may have been in some ways, it certainly had the overall effect of making the would-be writer feel part of a solid, and consistent, community of writers. The handbooks of figures and schemes, the collections of commonplaces, tropes, and topics all functioned to make the Renaissance schoolboy feel a sense of community as he composed, drawing on the props of previous oral and written craftsmen as he composed a page of

Latin. His school language, in other words, did not belong to him; it belonged to the culture to which he was striving, by writing and reading, to belong.

For Ong, the romantic movement becomes the historical counterpoint to the Tudor age in the history of literary. The early Renaissance's emphasis on the explicit, technical rhetoric of handbooks and copia encouraged the use of the formulary as a means of placing the writer in a stable context. By the late eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries, this formulary tradition had been gradually replaced by the visual, highly literate and print-oriented emphasis on romantic expressiveness and private consciousness. By Wordsworth's and Coleridge's time, Erasmus' elaboration of oral formulary had been replaced by a new understanding of genius. No longer the assimilator of an abundance of oral formularies, the writer became the originator of language as well as thought.

Ong's ideas on romanticism and its effects on literacy are more complex than this superficial contrast of Tudor formulary and romantic expressive theory suggests. In what is a strikingly original analysis, Ong locates the origins of romantic theories of composition in the work of Peter Ramus, the Renaissance educator and textbook writer. Ramus, Ong argues, separated his curriculum from the residually oral concerns of Tudor rhetoric and created a new approach to writing based on visual logic. This logic, although Ramus and his followers were to claim otherwise, was very different from medieval, scholastic logic; it was, rather, a simple, unanalytical and imitative logic in which the oral,

dialectical concerns of the rhetorical tradition were supplanted by the simple formats of the printed page and the commercial ledger. (Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology, Chapter Seven, pp. 167-189). Ramistic logic was actually not logic at all but a superficial rendition of rhetorical arrangement, falsely separated from invention and style. Later, the post-sixteenth-century followers of Ramus, who produced some 800-1100 editions of Ramus' and Talon's works between 1550-1660, were to raise "orderly sequence, often superficially and sometimes implausibly conceived, over every other aspect of communication and thus directly furthered development of the 'plain style'" (Rhetoric, Romantic, and Technology, p. 85).

This fact seems also to be supported by an application to current composition practice. The five-paragraph theme might be seen as a Ramistic visual schema that current-traditional rhetoric has superimposed over much of student discourse. Just as Ramus was influenced by the visual schemes or models of the commercial ledger book, we, as writing teachers, are influenced by the need to package student thought in efficiently-moveable units, to keep the composition industry functioning. Even if we decide that such information processing is a necessary evil, we can benefit as teachers by at least recognizing the simplistic visual schema--the five paragraph essay--that controls much of our treatment of the writing process.

In summary, then, Ramus and his followers were directly responsible for reducing the copia, commonplaces, and other complexities of the earlier rhetorical tradition to the visual

paradigms and divisions of the printed page. But how did this late Renaissance accentuation of visual arrangement create a context for romantic-expressive approaches to composing?

Ong answers this question by arguing that, once Tudor rhetoric's emphasis on the oral voice and dialectic had been successfully replaced by Ramistic emphasis on visual arrangement, then the way was cleared for the romantic emphasis on the writer as private composer, separated from other composers in both space and time, writing in a private study apart from the play of voices so important to oral dialectic. Writers began to see themselves as making statements against rather than for others, speaking in isolation against a "world that was too much with us." Writing and private consciousness reinforced one another, and poets became the "unacknowledged legislators of the world." These statements, of course, oversimplify a complex movement, but they do help clarify what Ong says in closing a chapter on Ramistic method in Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology:

> The change [from oral rhetoric to Ramistic method] would not have its full effect until Dryden and after, but the older preoccupation with logic as an instrument of discourse (rather than of private thought), with its accompanying sententious rhetoric, was giving way to interest in a logic of private inquiry and a more tenuous rhetoric (later to be supplanted by a rhetoric of sentiment, passion, and 'feeling'). pp. 101-102.

Ong clarifies this evolutionary change from oral formulary and rhetoric to romantic individualism by referring to a concept

he calls "noetic abundance" (Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology, p. 279), or what today we might call the "knowledge explosion." The romantic mind, Ong suggests, had been alienated from its social context by empiricist and Ramistic theories of communication, both of which set the composer apart from his social world, in the first instance, as an inductive observer of the world, in the second instance, as an isolated composer of that world who must simultaneously make plain sense of complex experience. The technology of writing, as simplified by Ramus and his followers, simply would not hold up against the spectacular increase in knowledge in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The new world of science, colonization, and political change simply could not be reduced by Ramistic methods to the contours of the printed, linear page. The romantics, then, turned the Ramistic emphasis on visualization into a metaphor: the writer, through inspiration and alienation, could make sense of this world only by condensing experience into a densely-packed lyrical poem, stripped of its conventional diction, set in new rhythms and forms. Yet all this had, at least in theory, to be accomplished, to the romantic mind, by a verbal technology stripped of oral formulary and convention, stripped, in other words, of just those oral elements that had given Tudor and traditional writers their ability to create the sense of an ongoing and vital social context.

This romantic stripping away of oral formulary, however, was not matched by a comparable alteration of overall spatial form. The printed page, as in Ramus' time, remained the overall, spatial framework for written discourse. Originality, the Romantics

suggested, had still to be accomplished within the neat and tidy boundaries of the book. The rules of this new game were and are fascinating ones to play by for experienced and talented writers and readers. But they are extremely frustrating ones for those developing the ability to write.

IV. Student Writers Today

What does the Ongian perspective on the history of literacy suggest to today's college writing teacher? I believe it provides us with insights into the situations within which our students write. They are products of romantic reactions against what Ong has called the rhetoric of a primarily oral culture, where rhetorical handbooks, collections of commonplaces, and lists of topics and tropes served to re-connect the writer with centuries of formulary material. By the late Renaissance, these "oral residues," as Ong labeled them, had overcomplicated the act of writing with elaborate frameworks of oral schemes that had originally been intended to fulfill mnemonic and paidaic functions. Though these oral formularies were often superflous to the technology of the printed page itself, they fulfilled an important function for the Renaissance writer, particularly the schoolboy. They connected him, at an early age, with a long tradition of oral and written discoursers, providing a cultural context in which the social function and purpose of writing was clear. The Renaissance schoolboy, in other words, did not have to be taught, as are many of his modern counterparts, to write "with a purpose." The purpose resided in the sense of community that was created by endless recyclings of apothegms, adages, proverbs,

and commonplaces in endlessly varied contexts. Today's students are taught to expunge or avoid rather than to explore, amplify, or elaborate upon commonplace material. They, like their recent forerunners, the romantics, must in their own modest ways strive for originality, but they also, like their more distant forerunners who were students of Peter Ramus, strive for stylistic plainness and readability as well. And they must carry out this most difficult of dual purposes without the years of grammar school training in rhetoric that was afforded the Renaissance schoolboy.

A kind of writer's schizophrenia results from this striving for complex purposes without the requisite exposure to the conventions of language. Students are caught in a pinch between writing as conventional expression and writing as original statement. They want to belong to the writer's community, striving for the post-Romantic goals of originality and uniqueness. But they also sense, because they are language using animals, that writing is also a social game in which the sound of the human voice will always, if expertly used, dramatize an original text. Sometimes the conventions of an oral tradition are a writer's sole means of making words viable in a social context.

V. Teaching Implications

I have little space left for direct classroom application. But I do have the space to suggest several teaching strategies that will help address our students' schizophrenia about writing.

1. Student writers need to spend much more time than they do now coming to understand the "speech

community," as linguists call it, that frames any individual writer's performance. This teaching of community awareness must proceed along with the teaching of skills.

2. All the recent research into students' revision processes must be turned into a pedagogical framework for the teaching of writing as a way of knowing as well as a way of communicating. The communicative and epistemic functions of writing must be taught interdepently.
3. Students must, in the course of their learning, come to distinguish the relationship between the immediate audiences and the implied communities of their writings. This will require a far more explicit treatment in a composition class of the values of the teacher, who will be, whether by example or preachment, the students' primary means of entering a speech community. As teachers create specific audiences and contexts for particular assignments, they will need as well to contrast the needs of these specific situations to the general, academic community's understanding of writing.
4. Perhaps more important than any other implication, however, is the suggestion in this paper that writing courses must strive to integrate the language arts, to have writing, talking, and seeing interact in the students' composing processes.

Linked with this implication is the realization that composition teaching methods must integrate the old and the new, must re-establish the place in American education of training in the oral and written exercises of the classical progymnasmata. But we must accomplish this re-establishment in a context that also recognizes the differences between post-romantic emphases on originality and the classical sense of oral play in written contexts.

Joseph J. Comprone
University of Louisville